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## The Romanian Ideology:

*A Critique of the Meaning of Tradition during the Interwar Period*

Mihai Gheorghiu

*„God’s world still reigns here  
and Grigorescu’s world reigns on our land“.*

*N. Iorga*

Iorga’s statement condenses the whole paradigm of pre-war and interwar Romanian traditionalism. Everything stems from this statement uttered in 1907. Romanian traditionalism assumes the belief that the traditional village belongs to an archaic world. It is a world legitimated by faith, religion, therefore by sacred values, a world that is respectful of the original model, in the sense that it perpetuates this model, a world of rituals embedded in all gestures, a world where each act reveals itself as a ritual. Life does not mean survival, but organic living in the realm of mystery.

The peasant of this village is meant to have a sort of original, constituent priesthood, which makes him an essential man, the only essential man. This kind of peasant is thus a servant of a cosmic liturgy repeated to the end of time. The peasant is the Man, the Adamic descendant destined to embrace the cult of the living God. Therefore, his existence acquires a real, unique, essential foundation. He is the shepherd of the seen and the unseen.

The order of his existence is viewed as essential. Only this order can be a foundation for something. What is not embodied by this order is not disorder, but chaos – a dark, curse-befallen world. What is this accomplished order? It is the original, therefore sacred, non-distinction of nature and humans. Nature and the land are co-substantial with man because they create him in the real world. Everything is related to creation. Thus, the distinction is blurred. It is no longer an ontic (ontological?) distinction. The peasant (and the shepherd) is entrusted with this order, his existence is a liturgical service, not just the sum total of disordered human acts. Hence the conclusion that only that world, therefore that history, which takes the peasant into account, is the real one. In other words, only the world preserved by the peasant is legitimated as a world, not simply as history.

The archetypal elements of this essential beingness are: the land, the community, the church. These are the three pillars that enable the peasant, a silent priest of nature, to be the master of eternity.

In this order, the land is not the source of an enslaving submission, but the firm ground of a redemptive foundation. The land gives, offers

the infinite access to splendour. The peasant acquires the foundation of his liturgical service from, and with the help of, the land. The land does not only mean a simple estate, but a path to liberation, to real freedom, to redemption. Together with its reigning inner order related to habitation, the community stands for the order of communion, of belonging together. The church fulfils the original value placed on the peasant as a servant of God. The church is the supernatural union of the land and the peasant. The priest who serves in such a church is nothing but a peasant who acquired explicit awareness of his primaeval mission.

Roughly speaking, this is the overview of the traditionalist „chimera“ instilled into the intellect of the interwar traditionalist militant. Of course, there is a wide array of differences and nuances, but the solid source of the model is still in place.

The traditionalist transfer is only an attempt to lay the foundations via ancestors. The ancestors are recreated according to a model that should be the answer to the aggressive and destructive present, therefore a vicious circle of recollections and of projection as salvation, as a cure for desperation. The traditionalist individual tries to find the end of a lost, uncertain way. Instead of mapping humanity as being enslaved by history, he wants to project into the past the utopia of essential, fissureless and non-residual redeeming Christianity.

The peasant as a priest of nature is the image that measures the fear experienced by traditionalism in front of the present, the fear that we are not followed by any destiny, but only by a latent decay. We do not refer here to *semănătorism* (the Romanian for „sower“), though it really exists and is part of the composition, but to the attempt made by a whole segment of Romanian culture in order to ideologically project the essential and timeless Romanian humanity

on the path to redemption. The lack of the historical substance of the age, of Romanian civilization, opposes an escape and (ef)fusion into national transcendence.

This escape from history, seen as an essential metaphysical challenge after all, and the only real one anyway, disturbed 20<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian culture from *semănătorism* and *poporanism* (*Romanian populism*), through Orthodoxism, to protochronism.

Afraid of ourselves, of our prolonged absence from our own history, we looked for a myth able to lay the foundations for a revival. Agricultural archaicity, blended with Orthodoxy treated as organicity, has been found as an auroral myth with particular nuances. Falling prey to cultural ideology, the terms have been falsified with an affected innocence. We witnessed a passage from the representation of the peasant as a unique Romanian reality, a Christian and Orthodox peasant for two millennia, to the ideological utopia of archetypal and mioritic Romania. Thus, the boycott of history has been completely assimilated by the ideological construction of an original, unique and fundamental anthropological model. The ideological model is founded on the rejection of reality, on the alleged penetration of the unique and real meaning of reality. Ideology transfers the ultimate conclusion of a militant and sometimes millenarian explanation to a kind of neutrally-considered history understood as a shapeless and degrading flow. History is excluded by falsification. The soteriological meaning of the ideological discourse prevails authoritatively over any other kind of explanation that would lead either to another determination or to a modern sense of history. Ideological thinking is vicious thinking par excellence.

There are materialist, immanentist and „progressive“ ideologies, on the one hand, and traditional and regressive ideologies, on the other. The former type of ideologies resorts to science and appropriates the ascending path to faith and

science in a profitable ambiguity, the latter claims to be founded on religion and on the traditional morals of the community. The appeal to dogma, to the Church and mysticism is falsified the very moment this appeal occurs. The liturgical experience cannot be an object of ideological commerce.

Ideologies are political tools used in the fight against power. Their purely political character is sometimes weakened by the cultural component, yet without changing the final meaning of what is at stake. More often than not, the ideological dimension lays the foundations for politics, not for culture or for religious behaviour. *Sămănătorism*, *Poporanism*, *Gândirism*, Orthodoxy also represent the stages of an initiation journey of Romanian ideology that alludes to more or less obvious political progress. The ultimate task that all these stages assigned themselves was to bring to light a formula of the Romanian phenomenon. This formula should not have been the result of a simple historiographic examination of the Romanian sense of becoming, but of an established fundamental intuition meant to lead to an essential representation able to shape in its turn the metaphysical destiny of the Romanian people. The historical, political, economic and social crises got a dogmatic answer, all being founded on a „Romanian apriorism“. Thus, the world of Romanian traditional civilization became „Christ-imbued“, bearing the divine likeness, like a *materia signata*, which latently preserves the realm of the Mothers, the intrinsic sacredness of the created world.

Nevertheless, the ideology of Romanian traditionalism originates in the so much hated history. Therefore, it has a polemic and militant character. This traditionalist and regressive ideology, which claims to inherit and thus prolong the metaphysical position of the „Romanian man“, is an ongoing critique, therefore a related position adopted by the modern age, by politics, by the West.

The traditionalist ideologist pretends to convey the truth founded on Orthodoxy since day

one. Nonetheless, it is this very organic affiliation that must be questioned – to what extent traditionalist ideology is really founded on Orthodoxy, to what extent it reveals the truth of a real theological experience. Ideology is never an experience, it is always an *Ersatz*, an eternally resumed *as if*. Ideology is always dominated by the permanent shift of levels, concepts and points of reference. Ideology is always a cabinet formula.

The ideological dimension suppresses history by formulating an intrinsic, constituent finality of the phenomenal world. Ideology always reads the noumenal world. It constantly aspires to the gnostic phase. The ideological discourse cannot put up with the weakness of the possible, but only with the force of reality that is definitely established by the very ideological expression. Ideology is forever manichaeist – the good and the evil are the undoubtedly explained and exemplified poles of its construction. Sin only becomes part of history by means of the other. The ideological possession of the world assures the initiate of his intrinsic purity. Only betrayal can bring dishonour on the initiate.

The truth is that Romanian ideology did not manage to perfectly frame the ideological translation of the world. However, the initial terms, specific to such an ideological revision do exist and can be noticed in their historical becoming, characteristic of this formula.

The lie or the fake are two of the real fundamental forces of history. The world is the space of clashing ideologies understood as an expression of the struggle caused by the will to power. The frail will to search for truth, for poetic or religious experience is unconditionally subjected to the willpower principle. Abandoning this determination is the only thing that really leads to victory.

The legitimacy of Romanian autochthonism has been found in opposing a primary and original model to the Western model which is considered to be false, dominating and demonic. The Romanian peasant has been viewed as the essential bearer of the meaning of Romanian

beingness. In this respect, we should not object to the idea that every people have their own image when passing through history, nor should we stand against the urge to affirm or support this image. We need to affirm that it is not ideology that gives full measure to this image, but the historical, cultural or religious creation. The answer to the challenge of history must be an answer, not a way to avoid any real reference to it.

Stemming from a „Romanian apriorism“, traditionalist, autochthonous and regressive ideology ceases to account for the real world of temptations, defeat and neutrality, which survives by borrowing all forms of aggression under the guise of a chameleon. Apart from any event, it aims at the essential matrix and its epiphany. Ideology never says anything about the dark shadow of everyday existence, about the evidence of the dull day to day life. The tormenting time of the survival practice will never arouse any interest. What matters is the always suprahistorical essential time. This unlimited view that sees its own image through aeons hardly makes any room for another weaker experience devoid of a suprahistorical stake. Thus, ideology tends to serve as a substitute for mystical theology. Moreover, it tends to turn into dogmatic theology.

The historical destiny of a people is always a mystery. Any formula can slide into demonism, namely into an essential failure within our being. Man lays his final existential bet in the essential conflict over freedom unfolded in the modern age. The outstanding figures of Romanian traditionalism can hardly utter intelligible things. However, the few authentic things come from Christian existentialists like Vulcănescu or from eccentric figures like Cioran. Apart from its massive dullness, the ultimate sin committed by Romanian ideology is that it could not avoid falling into political theology, into a theology of violent revolution that means guidance on „the path to God that would be resurrected by politics“ (P. Evdochimov). The confused missionaries' sacred violence always ends in banal crime and disaster.

Whether or not followed by political solutions, the traditionalist and autochthonous boycott was an intellectual answer given by the Romanian historical world to the essential historical challenge of the West. Much has been said about the bimillennial civilization, about the historical crisis, about the loss of tradition, but the fundamental question about modernity and about the challenge it poses has been completely overlooked. The Romanian answer given during the interwar period was a disappointment because it disregarded this very question and also the chance to get a real answer. Interwar autochthonism and Orthodoxism ended in confusion and garrulousness, which is nothing but the pathology of the really lost logos. There is no denying that the tensions of modernity have been correctly understood, that the flood of post-war nonsense and the great Bolshevik challenge had to receive an appropriate answer deeply rooted in Europe's Christian tradition that was meant to strengthen the meaning of historical experience rather than deconstruct it. Therefore, only a vague puppet answer was given. Slogans and mystical pastiches can never answer essential challenges.

However, the whole interwar discussion posed the problem of Romanian culture typology and of the evaluation of the historical stage it went through. By making such an inquiry, most traditionalist answers attempted to come back to a primeval and ahistorical *Urgrund*, the only one able to vouchsafe for a new foundation and for a fulfilled Romanian destiny. This is completely wrong and it is also a pernicious confusion. The foundation-laying revolutionary discourse has always answered the foundational, synchronic or diachronic historical shiver. Mystical voices that call either for progress or for restoration can be heard long after history was boycotted: „The revolution was called for in the name of Jesus in order for us to open his arms. The revolution did not plow the land that was not blessed sooner or later by Heaven with fertility“ are C. A. Rosetti's words used as a dictum for a century, though

they acquired different meanings in different historical circumstances. The voice of ideology always plays the role of an apocalyptic trumpet.

Those who blow the same trumpet perceive Romanians' history as a meadow where lambs are chased by a wolf embodying the alien principle. In other words, if Romanian history had been genuine, we could have accomplished the essential mission to actually dissolve history, to mistake the people for the Church. Consequently, we would have had a mystical Romania full of sheepfolds and monasteries, which stands for any traditionalist's sentimental utopia. Redemption is ideologically and politically dealt with, the painful lucidity of the historical experience will be replaced by a false-principled mythology. The Gospel itself is only considered as a political and ideological guide necessary for interpreting history. The weak autochthonous and traditionalist answer stems precisely from false thinking, from the badly founded apologetic god, from high-flown declamations that hide immense trickery. Newspaper theology and the mysticism of the political revolution are fakes in action. A real cultural revival hardly matches the disturbing trends reported in newspapers at the time. At that moment, Eliade's generation undoubtedly exploded in Romanian culture, but it stood alone, having its own problems and destiny. All authentic things that are part of the interwar Romanian cultural creation lie outside the sphere of ideology and urged militancy.

Mircea Vulcănescu is the outstanding example of genuine value, of humanity uncorrupted by ideological fakes.

Crainic's appeal to the values of the traditional village, which is logically consistent with Iorga's one, is the last refuge from hopeless thinking. The unique Romanian spiritual tradition undoubtedly originates from the village world, and peasant life defines the Romanian historical existence. However, this does not

mean that this embeddedness is allowed to turn into a solution to a disembedded present. What kind of intuition can precede any judgement on the archaic village at this time? The intuition of genuine and substantial innocence is the answer to this question. 'Archaic' stands for purity. Emphasis is laid now on custom and tradition, now on the living experience of cosmic liturgy. In both cases we look for a representation of the essential community to which, we are told, we could come back if we wanted to. This is exactly what we cannot do. The village thus becomes the symbol of the essential Christian community. The peasantry becomes the bearer of a mystery and the owner of a mission. Dostoevsky also affirmed the mysterious embeddedness in the people who were on their mysterious way to redemption because they were faithful, humiliated, enslaved and anguished. That was the real Christian extent of an apocalyptic hope, without any ideological implications at stake. Romanian culture, which still relates everything to a sentimental utopia or to a kind of even-tempered ideological rhetoric, does not contain this apocalyptic view. The ideology of interwar Romanian traditionalism tends to be taken for religious thinking, for a theology of history. Though it does not tend towards anything else but this mimetic conversion, there is nothing else but this mimetic conversion from which it detaches itself as much as possible. If the assumption of a Christian position really leads to the rejection of the demonic, alienating modernity via technology viewed as a barrier to any spiritual communion, to the path to transcendence, then the fractured Romanian ideology, which is a function of political and cultural nationalism, shows that its object is not an object of thinking or contemplation. Its way has no specific end. It is the way to nowhere.

Ideological values are primarily created and carried by intellectuals. It is the intelligentsia that builds its social and political role on the ideological practice legitimated as an answer to the problems of history or, even greater than that, to



the destiny that must be fulfilled. Ideology means manifest power to an intellectual. Descending on Romanian ground directly from German Romantic theosophy, the ideology of traditionalist autochthonism opposes Westernization understood as an influence of the secular, mechanised and rationalizing ideology of the Enlightenment. Thus, the Romanian intellectual searched for an organicist and archetypal solution on a familiar and allegedly liturgical ground, falling into either folk metaphysics or into the theology of the political revolution. These problems reflect the very lack of problematics, of the test of freedom, of involvement, of the meaning of contemporary age. After all, modernity is regarded superficially. There is no in-depth analysis of modernity during the interwar period that is not tainted by an ideological stake. Though important and essential for the intellectual climate of the age, Nae Ionescu's analysis is a spiritual pedagogy rather than an analysis as such.

The most delicate problem of Romanian traditionalist ideology is the conversion of its discourse into the Christian Orthodox theological discourse. Christian in essence, this kind of thinking claims to be infallible.

Two aspects are of major importance in this respect: 1. the alleged *ab initio* Orthodox Christianity specific to ideology; 2. Orthodox Christianity assumed as an accomplishment, as an ideological certainty. Thus, the traditionalist and Orthodoxist ideological discourse describes a perfectly vicious circle: the ideological discourse is Christian, it *proves, authenticates* Christianity. Nothing is authenticated or proved. It is already given, assumed as a premise and also as a result. History is an authenticated fable, a story we read. It is what it is, it is its own reflection in the mirror, it is the sin of radical rationalism also assumed by the Enlightenment and its followers as universal reason. However, it is the ontological difference from the real Orthodox theological discourse that should be highlighted and analysed. The same should happen with the change of theology into a kind of philosophy of

the decoded history that has finally been discovered. This kind of history would be possessed and contained within the paralogs of the traditionalist discourse. The critique of European modernity developed from conservative, political or cultural outposts is one thing, but the expanded theosophy of a kind of traditionalism that considers itself as a panacea is another. This ideology should first reject its gnostic character and the claim to transcribe the real meaning of history. Nonetheless, it is precisely history that embodies this absolute resistance of what is objective and subjective, of the world's materiality and spirituality. It is precisely this reality that lasts and challenges forever. The real Christian theological spiritualism is completely different from the simplistic gnosis of reversibility or of theosophical Romantic nostalgia for the paradise-like age that has just come to an end. Culture's „mission“ is to establish a presence of the spirit in and for the world, to be the actual answer of challenge and involvement, not a fantastic and hallucinating diversion. The overflowing progressiveness, that characterizes the rationality of the realistic utopia of technology, cannot simply mirror its opposition to the aggressive backwardness in search of a molested innocence that can only be found at the level of *metanoia*, which is always ahead, not behind us. God endlessly looks for us ahead of us, in a place where we could be because we have to. Our being melts into hope, that is, into future, into something that runs counter to the nothingness of an alleged absence. The future can only be embodied by ourselves, whether fallen or rediscovered, but the fall means presence and reality alike, that is, the truth, not an „as if“, of our beingness.

Distinguishing itself as pedagogy, traditionalism defies the task of any pedagogy, namely the preparation for a time that brings along its own temptation. Romanian ideology simply prepares Romania for the narcissistic exercise completed on the edge of its own history falsified with gentleness and alleged innocence. The pious memory of our ancestors cannot replace the cruel

exercise of historical survival, of finding solutions in the very sense of preserving a heritage, not of destroying it by our lack of responsibility and by larval mioritism. The sad paradox of traditionalism is that it turns what it affirms – tradition – into a simple discourse about tradition, thus managing to hide precisely what it claims to reveal. Tradition survives only by its present necessity, not by an ideological and rhetorical imperative. It lies outside any rhetoric only if it manifests itself as an effective power, that is, in action.

Romanian traditionalism is a sentimental utopia to a great extent. It is a reaction to some souls hurt by the chaos of modernity. As ideology, it looks like a collection of touching prejudices defining a decentred world rather than an ideology whose monopolising character is shaped by its furious imperialism. However, traditionalist ideology managed to „bury“ Romanian culture in some useless approaches and debates which placed it so badly that it could hardly face the furious attack of communism, which is the very agent of generalised destruction that the traditionalist discourse aimed at so many times. Of course, culture cannot stand up against the tanks directly, but it can stand up against the decay of people and their spirit, it can stand up against making people embrace freely accepted slavery.

Romanian ideology deprived Romanian culture of the defence mechanism so much needed in the long fight against modernity embodied by communism. One may say that we would have suffered the same fate, irrespective of our heritage. In other words, we would have been enslaved by a spirit of darkness and human decay. Nevertheless, this would be a false argument because the entire logomachy about national specificity, about our place and role in the history of civilisation did not offer us anything. On the contrary, it wasted a lot of energy and ravaged the ground, making room only for an eternal national hymnography that fell on deaf ears. The ideological and cultural debate unfurled during

the interwar period was also significant for the cultural policy of the age, for the resources allocated in order to support different trends. Instead of endlessly redefining ethnic specificity, the tonnes of rubbish about hymns and ethnicity should have made room for a kind of literature closer to the real problems of modernity. All the notable figures of the period were somehow involved in the debate, but the result was not necessarily a more animated environment or any other direct advantage for the overall problem of interwar Romanian culture. Furthermore, the intensely politicised cultural milieu often turned these debates into a mere expansion of the political stake in society that was completely devoid of any cultural goal. As for the theological stake, it really worked in very few cases. In other words, this stake was genuine, lacking the political projections integrated into the struggle over power in a society where, although it was in itself socially and economically well balanced, the political system became even more unstable. Society was on the skids because of the worsening political system.

Interwar Romanian culture was an outstanding age due to the appearance of the top figures of the 1927 generation, and due to a brand new type of cultural expression and ideological dispute. However, this could not strengthen the weak core of a serial culture based on political and ideological directives, nor did it manage to alleviate the more or less prevailing contempt for the much-needed academic cultural foundation, in a culture which revived terribly and timidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also worth mentioning that creativity and construction put an end to all false dilemmas over the great strengths of the interwar cultural creation. The novel, the essays, the poetry, the philosophy, the music and the fine arts which managed to escape the Procrustean bed of the either/or choice remained an integrating part of 20<sup>th</sup>-century culture. All ideologically marked things that were forced to integrate themselves into the carapace of factitious militantism finally died out.



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